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1:40 PM

Women, Men and Words
Women's Art of Montreal
Tuesday, November 10, 1992, 2 P.M.
Maxwell Cummings Auditorium, Benaiah Gibb Pavilion
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Women, Men and Words

When Mrs. Lingard phoned me this spring and generously offered me the opportunity to speak to you on any subject I wanted, I wasn't entirely sure what my topic would be. As you heard in that very kind introduction, I've worn a number of professional hats, although nowadays, I spebd most of my time teaching and writing.

When the time came, I offered Mrs. Lingard the ponderous title, "The Creative Process: Women, Men and Words," which scooped up a number of concerns, problems and mysteries that have occupied me professionally and personally for the last twenty years or so. Really, the last 40 years or so, because my approaches to literature, art, and the complex dances of language that men and women perform around each other are resolutely bound up with my own history.

I come from a working class household in which three generations shared four rooms and a semi-finished basement. My grandmother, who immigrated to Canada in 1919 from the Finnish town of Savolinna, where she was the daughter of the town's wealthiest merchant, was the oldest member of my family household, and I was the youngest. In between were my French-

Canadian grandfather, my parents, and an ummarried aunt.

My grandmother, whose maiden name was Olga Paukkeneinen did not leave Finland by choice. She fell in love with a farmhand who worked for her family, became pregnant by him, and was exiled from her home and country almost immediately after her baby was born--a son she never saw, but who I had the pleasure of meeting a few years back, after these 70-year-old secrets finally rattled their ways out of the family closet.

My grandfather, Napoleon Hébert, wanted all his married life to meet his wife's son. In the early years of their marriage, he tried to convince my grandmother to adopt the boy, bring him to Canada, and raise him as their own. My grandmother, forbade it.

She did raise two daughters of her own, during the Depression, and she worked--as a cook at a lumber camp in the northern Ontario bush, then as a doctor's maid...while my grandfather laboured as a lumberjack, gold mine, and railway worker. After the Depression, in Toronto, my grandmother cleaned chickens for the Campbell Soup Company, ending her days as a homemaker.

The qualities she passed on to her daughters included--in varying proportions in each--a certain Victorian bourgeois acquisitiveness, some intolerance for ideas or people she found disturbing, a capacity for very hard work, and a strong sense of independence. The careers both these women went on to certainly eclipse any of my own professional achievments.

English was the default language in my early family

household. Letters and magazines came in Finnish; relatives phoned and visited and spoke French. My grandmother learned some French; my grandfather learned Finnish. But English was the most common of our common grounds. Not a very deep or broadly informed English, though. My mother and aunt didn't hear the nursery rhymes, familiar stories and colloquialisms that other children did and, for that matter, neither did I.

My father's Cabbagetown childhood, as the son of poor, alcoholic parents during the depression, also deprived him of that communal knowledge of stories and rhymes that middle-class parents passed on to their children.

I mention these elements of my own family history because it's these women--my grandmother, my mother and her sister--who inform my understanding of, and my prejudices about, women--just as my gentle, indecisive grandfather and my courtly, well-spoken father inform my understanding of men's relation to women.

And, as you may remember quite well, this relationship of the sexes was defined by the era as well. It included notions of appropriateness of language as well as action. One of my uncles was banished from the house for about ten years for having said the word "fuck" to my aunt. A Welsh friend of the family was quite vulgar in her speech but she was forgiven partly because she was a woman, as though there wasn't an appropriate censure for woman who swore constantly, so none was enacted.

If a difficult word--difficult in the sense that it was both unusual and sexual--came up in family conversation, it was inevitably a woman who leaned over and whispered its meaning

into my ten year old ears. Of course, those definitions weren't always accurate, and I remember a Polish aunt who whispered that "flagellation"--that is, whipping or flogging--meant "masturbation." In years to come, you can imagine how surprised I was to hear about devout Christians who "flagellated" themselves in the streets at Easter.

As I remember and reconstruct it, the linguistic map of language and gender looked something like this 40 years ago: Women were entrusted with communicating delicate truths, but their only socially acceptable language was clinical. Men simply didn't speak of intimate matters except, of course, indirectly, in tales, jokes or vulgar language. Men were entrusted as well with the job of policing language. Little boys, then as now, used language to demonstrate their bravado; little girls, then, but not now, either didn't have a vulgar sexual language or they successfully concealed it, whispering rather than trumpeting.

That's the sex role side of the language I learned but it doesn't tell the whole story. I was also taught that language could also be a tool to achieve justice, that men and women could share the common language of reason, and that this transcendant language was adequate to negotiate what we want and need from each other.

This notion was idealistic and, of course, naive. But like the idea that democracy is both a terrible form of government and the best form of government, the conviction that our shared, yet segregated, language could answer the needs of both men and women for self-expression and jsutice was an article of faith.

One thing that helped give shape to this, today's, discursive look at men, women and the languages they share was the release of Madonna's book, *Sex*, last month. In case you hanven't heard, the book shows Madonna strutting her stuff in the buff, artificially posed in hetero- and homsexual situations of bondage, and more conventional sexual and non-sexual situations. It's been called pornography but, from what I've seen, the style is not pornographic, but draws from thoroughly classical representation of the body and from styles that range from high fashion through album-cover illustration.

The subject of the book has come up in several of my classes. The women and men who react verbally to the book are, for the most part, predictable. Some of the men apologetically say that their interest isn't erotic and that they want the book just because they're Moadonna fans. Some of the women say that Madonna is reclaiming for herself the ways men have historically represented the bodies of women, and that she is thus striking a blow for the cause of women's freedom. One woman student said that she regarded herself as a "literary Madonna."

Another classroom event this year caught and held my attention. In a graduate class in creative writing, we discussed a short story in which a woman brags to a casual male friend how expertly she can perform oral sex--but in far grittier terms than those I just used. The women in this class who reacted--all adults, and some married with children--called it a "sweet" or a

"romantic" moment in the story. In another class, I heard three women unself-consciously discussing the problems of performing oral sex when their partner used a condom while the men in the class glanced at each other with great self-consciousness and surprised embarrassment, although tinged with amusement.

The fiction I read that is written by young women, in general, is far more sexually explicit and somewhat more clinical than that written by men--who tend to avoid it, or deal with it in the familiar terms of schoolyard bravado. So it appears that women continue to own a fuller sexual language but they are no longer discretely leaning over to whisper it in anyone's ear.

The most sophisticated men aren't entirely out of the picture, though. If I perform a quick survey of the stories they write, it's a surprise to discover that a *majority* of their central characters are women and that they often write from the point of view of a woman. However, the desire of these men to right past wrongs with their fiction can lead to a disturbing revisionism. I'm thinking, for instance, of the tendency of male writers writing about women to cast them both as victims and as paragons--which certainly does a disservice to their fuller humanity. In one creative writing master's thesis I recently read, the male author had chosen a turn-of-the-century woman in rural British Columbia as he presented her as a 1992. She was completely free of the sexism, racism and homophobia of her era...and in addition, she was a farmer, stunt motorcycle rider, a barnstorming flyer...and a civil rights activist.

Other recent books, such as Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, however, do an impressive job of showing a female character and her relationship to the society around her.

I fear that there has been another change on the male side of the equation, though. The less sophisticated men--and women--appear to have a reactionary response to these changes in the social and literary landscape, changes which sometimes go to ludicrous lengths to apologize for or correct the social inequality that has been forced on women in our culture.

Here, for instance, is a summary of a short story written by a young man in one of my introductory classes: A woman is married to a brutal and unfaithful man who is obsessed with watching sports on television. The woman, desperate for a satisfying human connection, has an affair with another man. When the husband discovers the affair, he murders the woman, cuts her head off and places it in an aquarium filled with piranha, facing a 24-hour sports channel. End of story.

I discussed this story in class first in a literary context then in the context of popular culture. I pointed out that in the book of Genesis, God punishes Eve by declaring that she will experience pain in childbirth, and I swung through other examples in which women are singled out for punishment, and culminated in a reference to slasher movies, in which the women who first fall victim to the weapons on the mass murderer or serial killer are almost always the young women who are sexually active. My reason for going through this list was to suggest to the students that, in writing stories which feature terrible

retribution visited on women, that they might not be creating anything new at all, but simply repeating a familiar and terrible script that our culture has programmed into them. From my point of view, both social and literary, it's a question of justice: Does a woman who seeks some solace outside a marriage in which she is brutalized deserve to be murdered and have her life further dishonored by such ugly treatment and--in the case of a film or story--display of her remains?

The response of this introductory class shocked me. The first voices to speak were those of young women, and almost all of them said that the woman in the story got what she deserved. Despite my careful analysis of his work in these cultural terms, the young man who wrote the story, no champion of self-examination or thoughtfulness, said that it was "just a story."

So while in one class, men are deferential to a fault and women feel free to discuss intimate aspects of sexuality in whatever language they choose--the language of the clinic or of the street--in another class, both sexes are ready to see women executed by their husbands for socially harmless behavior that is a refuge from physical brutality and domestic slavery.

Clearly, not everyone shares the same language or the same sense of story or narrative when it comes to gender. Partly because of the existence of stories like the one I just told about my class's response to "just a story," some women have decided that there is no justice to be found in language as we know it, or in stories as we know them. This is such a varied movement that I would be misrepresenting with any brief

description, but some ideas recur in many of its varieties. I suppose the central idea is that the structures of English, for example, just cannot accomodate women. The term Ms had to be invented, for example. We have no neutral pronoun, and the default pronoun--his, him, he--is masculine. Words that began their lives as purely descriptive, such as "hussey" for "housewife" acquire pejorative meanings far more often in the case of women than of men.

They also say that the way we think of stories is tailored to a male sensibility and that stories with a clear beginning, middle and end demonstrate a rigid and essentially male conception of reality. Women's reality, they argue, relies more on connectedness than on reduction and analysis, more on family, more on dream and image, and less on plot.

Some feminist theoreticians go so far as to link these perceived differences in their approach to life and literature with the differences between the male and female orgasm, arguing that the male orgasm is single, localized and is the consequence of an invasion of the woman's body. The female orgasm, on the other hand, is--I'm told--diffuse and multiple. And the literary argument that derives from this comparison is that writing by women, if the woman writer wants to express her essential nature, should also be diffuse, multiple, unplotted, and open to various interpretation.

Unfortunately, new ideas sometimes wind up sounding an awful lot like old ideas. One of my advanced women students who is quite influenced by these theories recently submitted several

stories in which the female protagonists held men captive as sex slaves, or captured men, used them sexually and then dined on them, saving their genitals for last. And frequently, stories by women who rightfully decry being objectified by their male counterparts write passages that present men as objects of desire, as sexual targets, as people to be possessed.

Institutions can also be complicit in these changes to, or manipulations of, public and literary language. Last week, I received an ad for a videotape, distributed by a university, that purported to show instructors how to avoid sexism in the classroom and to make it a place in which learning was as available to wom0en as it was to men.

One of the arguments summarized in this brochure was that male teachers shut women out of an accessible learning environment by being males. Maleness, or male culture, was defined quite specifically as talking about machines and sports, and the use of sexual innuendo; it was taken for granted that sexual innuendo made women feel excluded and that talk of sports and machines was likely to do the same.

I felt a very bitter irony in this. When I moved away from home and went to college in my mid-teens, I discovered the sex lines that organized the world. At the hyper-liberal college I attended, in the midst of the *sexual revolution*, I was surprised (I was naive) to discover women students paying their rents when they were off campus by offering their bodies to their landlords. I was shocked when boys offered the sexual services of their girlfriends to others, and shocked when their

girlfriends accepted. I was completely mystified when I saw women allow themselves to be auctioned off in what were called "slave auctions"--particularly in the context of a world in which civil rights was an urgent concern. All these things bewildered me because they flew in the face of my sense of the self-respect people should have for themselves and for each other.

As a result, when "women's liberation," as it was called in the 60's began, I greeted it with relief. To me, it meant that I would not be responsible for the lives of the women in my life, that I would be free of being their overseer, and they would be free of being my chattel.

So, last week, when I looked at this brochure for a film that assigned interests and language to individuals along sex lines, I was saddened to discover what a short distance we had travelled. The feminist movement, in its institutional guise, was offering us absolute definitions of identity: Men are sex, machines and the ritual violence of sport; women are nurturers, victims and outsiders. Identity exists as a collective concept, not an individual one.

If that's the case, where does it leave me? No fan of cars, no fan of sports? Where does that leave my hockey and baseball-playing daughter? Where does it leave my car-worshipping wife, who wants more than almost anything in the world to own a 1953 Studebaker? It leaves us all outside the warm, authoritarian fold of the collectivity that would define our sex roles, our language, our essential natures as mutually exclusve, as two

large countries without a common border. That would define our literature, our art, our ability to speak to each other, our capacity for sharing a common notion of justice, as impossible. That would return us to a repressive system that dictated identity based on sex.

If we accept the idea that instructors should avoid the language and narratives of "male culture" to better accomodate women, does that also mean that women instructors should avoid discussion of children, emotions and social inequality in classes with males? Or does this ideal of communication only cut one way? My point is this: We all exclude each other, make each other feel like outsiders; it's part of the human condition. A good teacher, whether man or woman, will read his or her class and quickly discover when to ignore the waving hand of the bright and aggressive male student, and when to solicit and encourage the opinion of the shy female student. That same teacher will be just as quick to ignore the aggressive female student to give time to the male student who needs encouragement.

We do not need categories of gender to define and serve the needs of individuals.

So, you see how quickly these things can turn full circle. The movement which rejects being defined by male language and male images develops its own deterministic notion of female identity that's also based almost entirely on the body--whether it be Madonna's body, photographed nude and stylishly posed by a

male photographer, or whether it be the essentialism of defining a woman's art through a description of her orgasm or menses.

The very finest writers and teachers have a more subtle and less cerebral relation to language which condemns us to sterotyped sex roles. Instead of calling that language "male" or "female," they call it stale, hackneyed and unjust; they attempt to make the language, and hence, the world it describes, new; they make us listen to the words again; they make us see again; and they serve our needs for justice and freedom by presenting a world with such ineluctable clarity that we must react to it as a newly discovered land, one in which nothing about men or women can be taken for granted.

I think that one way of making sure that our literature serves the needs of men and women is to depoliticize it--or to approach our political evaluations less through ideology than through the terms of *craft*. I cannot say with any confidence what is *essentially* a male point of view or *essentially* a female ppoint of view. There's too much contradiction and overlapping going on: some men are receptive, multiple, diffuse, connected, nurturing and intuitive; some women are aggressive, goal directed, selfish, and rigorously logical. Any system of though which denies this is totalitarian because it subjugates individual freedoms of the most modest and necessary sort to the abstraction of freedom of a collectivity.

I said that the two professional hats I've worn most often in recent years are those of the teacher and the writer. Well,

you've just heard from the teacher side of things, from the side who has to reconcile politics, personality and craft in the classroom. For the balance of my presentation, I'd like to read a short story called "Food People from my book *Wintering Over*. I've chosen this story because it deals with the physical representation of women by a man, and because it presents two people in a marriage, and the ways in which they each discover their own worth.

The language is my own.

"Food People."